

GLORIA STEINEM AND THE POWER OF BOOKS

by Alberta Davis Comer



he highlight of my work as a reporter for *Cognotes*, the American Library Association's daily newspaper published and distributed during both its Midwinter and annual meetings, was a one-on-one interview with Gloria Steinem during the 2003 ALA convention in Toronto. Because of this interview, I found myself involved in a fascinating conversation with one of the most well-known and influential feminists and activists of our time. Of course, I knew Steinem was one of the founders of *Ms.* magazine, but by talking with her and reading about her life later I learned much more about her, including the role of libraries during her childhood and her convictions about them now.

STEINEM'S BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Born in Toledo, Ohio on March 25, 1934, her childhood was spent traveling in her parents' motor home until they divorced in 1946. As a child Steinem never attended school for more than a few months at a time (Heilbrun, 1995, p. 18). Her mother gave up a career in journalism and later suffered from depression and neurotic illness (Conway, 1992, p. 657).

In her book entitled *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* Steinem described life with her mother. For many years, she and her mother lived upstairs in the house in which her mother had grown up. Of these years, Steinem writes:

In that house, I remember:

...hanging paper drapes I had bought in the dime store; stacking books and papers in the shape of two armchairs and covering them with blankets; evolving my own dishwashing system (I waited until all the dishes were dirty, then put them in the bathtub)...

...on a hot summer night, being bitten by one of the rats that shared our house and its back alley...

...coming home from a local library with the three books a week into which I regularly escaped... (Steinem, 1983, p. 134).

Steinem graduated in 1956 from Smith College in Massachusetts with a major in government, then spent two years studying in India. Upon her return to New York City, she worked as a free-lance writer. She covered political events and became more involved with women's causes. With the goal of increasing the inclusion of women in the political process, she helped form the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971. In 1972, she helped launch *Ms.* (Gloria Steinem, *Encyclopedia Americana*, 2001, p. 676). With the goal of increasing the inclusion of women in the political process, she, along with Betty Friedan, formed the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971 (Loveday).

THE ALA INTERVIEW

During the interview, Ms. Steinem discussed the importance for librarians to have pay equity and a pay scale based on comparable worth. About comparable worth, she elaborated:

... comparable worth is important to librarians because workers in male professions with similar qualifications are paid twice as much. Pay equity should be considered between professions, not just pay equality between people in the same profession. Librarians symbolize the reason why the women's movement went from the notion of equal pay for equal work to comparable pay in most female professions such as librarians. (Comer, 2003, p. 1.)

Ms. Steinem was very articulate, and her passion for her many interests, including libraries, was apparent. During the interview she elaborated on the positive impact libraries have on people's lives:

Steinem believes that librarians help change lives. They work in the role of advisor, as people enter libraries and ask for help in their life. Steinem asserts, "Libraries are the last community centers and are not limited by economic status, geography, religion." Librarians are also guardians of the institution where one can freely roam without any monetary

charge while finding specific information about other worlds one might enter. (Comer, 2003, p. 4.)

From her statement, it was apparent that Ms. Steinem held libraries and librarians in high regard, perhaps because books played such a significant role in her childhood.

In a recent interview for *New York Amsterdam News*, a magazine by and for young girls, Steinem, when asked how she developed into the person she is now, described how as a young person she escaped into books and found friends in books (Morgan and Victoria, 1997). During the interview with *Cognotes*, Steinem again affirmed the power of books and discussed how books had influenced her life.

Steinem attests to the power of books and "entering other worlds." As a young girl, she did not see a living female hero, except for Eleanor Roosevelt who Steinem says did not speak to her except perhaps to say, "Marry a president." Instead, her "heroine" was Louisa May Alcott. She read all of her children's books and her lesser-known adult novels. Since Steinem did not attend school until she was almost 12 years old, she lived in books. She imagined that Alcott, who she considered a friend, came to life. (Comer, 2003, p. 4)

CONCLUSION

In Steinem's talk to ALA members, it was apparent that not only does she hold librarians in high esteem, librarians also hold her in high esteem. From her youth forward, libraries and the written word have remained important to her. She received a standing ovation from the attendees and comments about her talk were very favorable. By the end of our interview, I too wanted to give a standing ovation to this truly inspiring woman who has influenced so many people with her passionate message for equality.

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